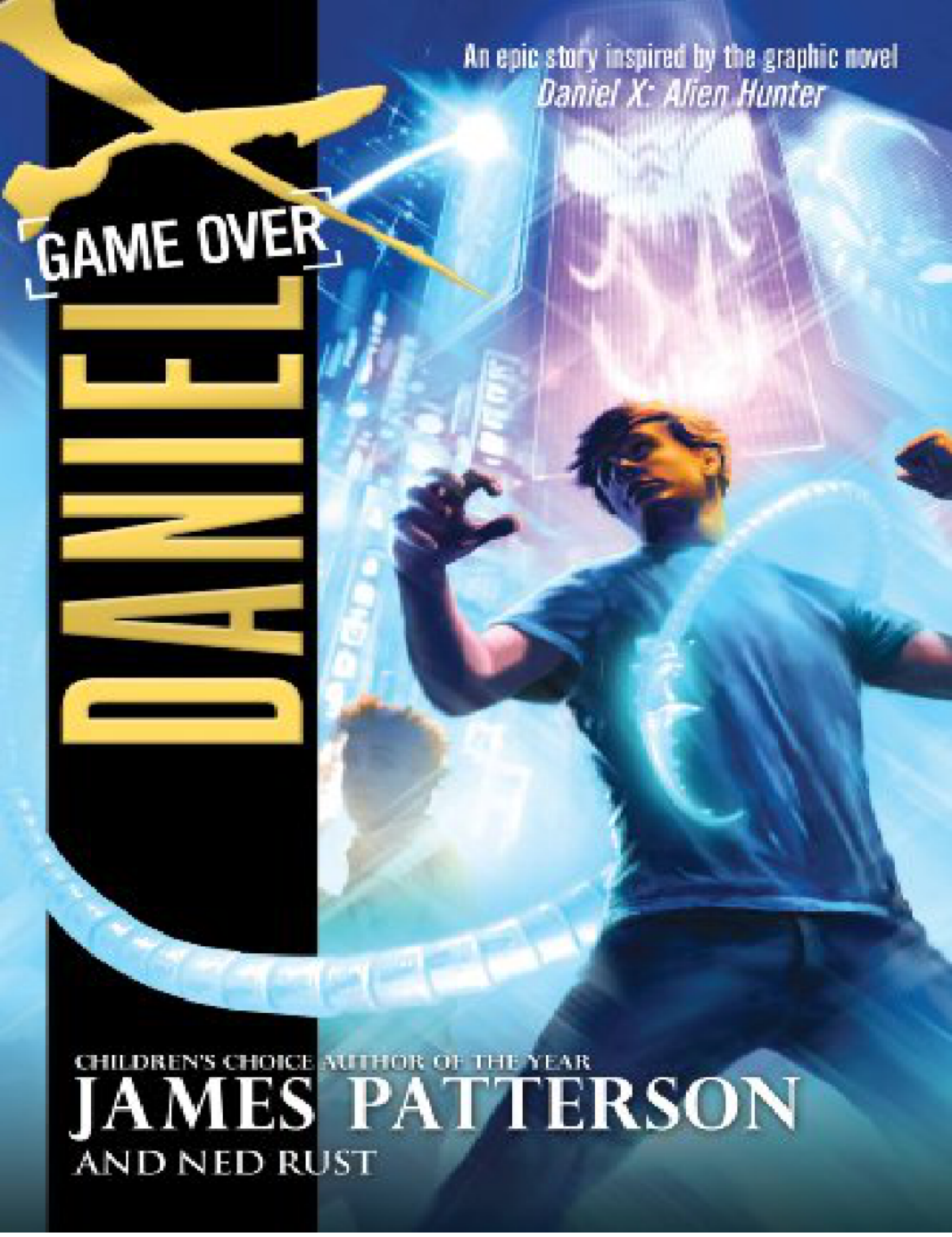
An epic story inspired by the graphic novel
Daniel X: Alien Hunter
GAME OVER
DANIEL X
CHILDREN'S CHOICE AUTHOR OF THE YEAR
JAMES PATTERSON
AND NED RUST

DANIEL X

GAME OVER

JAMES PATTERSON
AND NED RUST

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For Ruth, for knowing what's what.
—NR

BOOK ONE

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Chapter 1

It was the most high-tech space I'd ever seen, outfitted wall-to-wall with the most cutting-edge gaming software ever devised. Like something you'd expect to see in a secret underground bunker or in NASA's flight command center. The images on the floor-to-ceiling screens and at the holograph stations were crisper and more vivid than reality itself.

The kids waiting in line for a console were all agog in a freaky trance—sweaty, shaking, pale, wide-eyed—like hard-core drug addicts desperate for a fix. I couldn't blame them. The GC's game offerings were truly revolutionary. They always seemed to have better graphics, greater depth of play, and *way* more addictive hunt and battle scenarios than their competitors in the gaming market did.

How, you might ask? The explanation is actually pretty simple. You see, the GC was run by a couple of very, very clever *aliens:* Number 7 and Number 8 on The List of Alien Outlaws on Terra Firma.

In other words, by not one *but two* of my most devious mortal enemies.

Chapter 2

This little exchange had been keeping me awake since I'd first heard it and was precisely why I had come to Tokyo. That snippet had made it clear that Number 7 and Number 8 were possibly about to wipe the human species off the face of the earth. And on a personal note, I was pretty sure that yours truly was the "special friend" they mentioned. In other words, they knew all about me, and they weren't exactly shaking in their alien booties.

According to The List computer—the alien-tech laptop that has been my bible since I started this gig—going after an alien in the top-twenty deadlies is basically a crapshoot in terms of whether you're going to live or die. But The List isn't some all-knowing machine. It's just an encyclopedia of what we alien hunters and our friends upload into it. Kind of like an ultrasecret wiki about superpowered psychopathic aliens.

All The List had to offer about Number 7 and Number 8 was that the pair had spent the past few years masquerading as Earth's ultimate power couple. In human disguise, they were known as Colin and Ellie Gygax, founders and owners of the Game Consortium, the biggest and most clandestine video-game corporation in the world.

The rest of the info I had was courtesy of Google: the video games created by the Game Consortium were so addicting that phrases like "brainwashing" and "mind control" were sometimes used by concerned parents and teachers when describing them. There were even stories of kids who acted out some of the scenes in the games and landed themselves in detention—or worse.

But GC hadn't technically broken any laws—yet—so governments had done nothing to stop them. I knew it was time for me to act. Unfortunately, the GC's computer systems had proved impossible to hack from the outside. These guys were about twenty times more tech savvy than I was, so electronic surveillance was not exactly easy.

If I wanted to find out more about this place, I would have to get behind the scenes.

Chapter 3

Prayer, Number 1 on The List of Alien Outlaws. Did the clerk know? Had my cover been blown? Were Number 7 and Number 8 watching me? Did they know I was there?

I refused to let paranoia get the best of me and so switched gears.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir," I said, extracting myself from the pile. "I'll be on my way, but let me help you with these boxes first."

The clerk looked momentarily confused, clearly not the cleverest creature to ever step off a UFO. A good tip to remember: politeness and civility throw a goon every time.

I heaved a box that had partially split open. Something metal was poking out, and I shifted the box so I could peer inside.

"No!" The clerk suddenly sounded more anxious than hostile. "I've got it. Pleassse, go back upstairsss. Thisss isss a ssservice corridor only."

"Sorry!" I said with forced cheer. "Have a good day, sssir!"

I was feeling a lot less cheerful than I sounded. What I'd seen inside that box was something no video-game store should need: guns—dozens of them.

And they were definitely not garden-variety man-made handguns that I could easily change into something else. In fact, their Andromedan trinitanium alloy suggested they were imported from a galaxy far, far away—specifically for the purpose of eliminating hard-to-eliminate beings from other planets.

And I just happened to be one of those beings.

I pretended to walk back the way I'd come, then when the clerk wasn't looking I quickly turned myself into a replica of one of the many light fixtures on the walls. The hench alien hastily got his boxes back in order and rushed the cart farther down the hall, where he swiped his ID card at a door bearing a sign that read 従業員.

I hoped to heck that meant "Employees Only" and not "Alien Hunter Execution Chamber."

Chapter 4

anything that looks like a trap, we want to know about it."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n!" Joe saluted.

I released the lock with a micro-RF broadcast from the palm of my hand. "Let's go."

Willy, Dana, and I hustled down a hall where we found three doors, a small, narrow window in each. We spread out and each peered through one. Mine was dark.

"Over here," Willy whispered, a dim, bluish glow visible through the glass. "One… two… three!"

Defenses ready, we swept into a space that appeared to be a projection booth of some kind.

We were looking down into a theater. Rows and rows of teenagers wearing headphones and holding video-game controllers sat transfixed, eyes glued to monitors built into the backs of the seats in front of them. A stage at the front was filled with riot police and soldiers, and—

Wait a minute! The figures onstage weren't moving. They were just mannequins. But from here, they looked as lifelike as any you'd find at Madame Tussauds wax museum.

Even weirder: intermingled with the police was an assortment of what I'd technically define as thugs, monsters, and all-around bad guys. It looked like the GC might've hired the best special-effects team in Hollywood to put this production together. It was an eerie scene, and it was about to get even eerier.

I looked closer and now could see that a black bag rested near each player's feet. I zoomed in my alien-enhanced vision on one of the screens. They were all playing what appeared to be Crown of Thorns IV, doing battle with video game–sized versions of the thugs onstage.

"Maybe they're beta testing Crown of Thorns V," I speculated. I was pretty certain I'd never seen the levels they were playing, and the graphics were even better than what I'd seen out on the showroom floor.

"Maybe," said Dana, "but what's the deal with the creepy mannequins onstage?"

"Haven't figured out that part yet," I confessed.

It all became clear in a moment when every game display in the theater flickered. Now the players were fighting an on-screen police officer or soldier. Then, after a few minutes, a bright red icon flashed:

CHANGE WEAPONS CHANGE WEAPONS CHANGE WEAPONS

In almost perfect synchrony, the kids took weapons from the black bags at their feet. Then, we all held our breath as we watched the armed teenagers charge boldly down the aisles to the stage.

"What the—?" Willy began, as Dana let out a startled cry. But the sounds of gunfire below drowned out any possibility that she'd blown our cover.

In seconds, the good guys had been reduced to smoking, stinking puddles of melted plastic and wire. But if that weren't disturbing enough, I noticed something else: the monsters onstage had been left completely untouched.

The players looked around, almost as if they were in a daze, and a few even slumped to the floor. But some of the more alert ones started circling one another, and I could tell we were seconds away from an all-out brawl.

"I don't think those were regular guns," Willy commented.

"Whatever," said Dana, shaking her head. "That is just *sick.*"

"It's even sicker than you think," I agreed, as I ran some quick math. There were hundreds of millions of GC games and consoles in the world. If the company was able to just flick a switch and turn every player into an armed killer…

"Let's get out of here," I said, just as the screens flashed another message:

GAME OVER GAME OVER GAME OVER

The brainwashed players collapsed to the floor.

Chapter 5

corporate neighborhood with fancy retail and restaurants around the edges. We needed someplace a little quieter, a little less crowded, a little less likely to be frequented by Number 7 and Number 8's minions.

"Keihin," I said, spotting a sprawling, industrial-looking area on the map down along Tokyo Harbor. It seemed like the kind of place that would have plenty of good spots to hide, and not too many people—or aliens.

"Get on," I said, quickly materializing Pasmo fare cards and handing them out as a bus pulled up. "We've got a bit of a ride ahead of us."

"If I lose my mind from hunger," said Joe, "I'm blaming you."

"You lost your mind a long time ago," Dana quipped.

"I hope it's a scenic route," said Emma. "Apart from Number 7 and Number 8 being here, I'm loving what I've seen of this country so far. It's so… *foreign*."

I knew just what she meant, I thought, settling down by a window near the back of the mostly empty bus. Although, technically speaking, *everything* is foreign to me. I am, after all, quite possibly the universe's most displaced orphan. I clutched my arm to my chest as a wave of homesickness washed over me. I call it homesickness; yet I barely have any memory of what my home was like.

I turned and looked behind us out the bus window, hoping to hide my stupid emotions from my friends. The sinister GC Tower still loomed above us, and I again wondered if Number 7 and Number 8 were in there. Probably, I figured. The only things that have been constants in my life are the monsters I'm fated to kill—or die trying.

That and *feeling sorry for myself,* apparently. I needed to get a grip. What was that lesson I had I learned in my last martial arts training session? Something about how if your emotions are getting in the way, you need to tie them to what's going on around you. You need to link them to something practical and immediate.

Like the problem of six aliens masquerading as tattooed young thugs who got on the bus at the next stop.

Chapter 6

knock out the bus driver with a blow to the back of the head, while another removed what looked like a high-tech staple gun and fired it into the father's shoulder. The poor man screamed in pain and fell to the floor.

I didn't need to say a word to Dana, Emma, Willy, and Joe—we all stormed to the front of the rapidly decelerating bus.

The man wasn't dead—he wasn't even bleeding—but whatever they had just done to him sure didn't tickle.

"All right, tough guys," said Willy, standing up to his full five foot two inches and throwing out his not-exactly-intimidating chest. "Get off this bus, or I'm going to pour a fifty-five-gallon drum of hurt all over your heads."

The big goon turned and for a moment looked at Willy like he'd lost his mind. Then he joined his friends in raucous laughter.

"Maybe we can paralyze them with humor?" suggested Joe as the thugs jumped up on the seats around us and simultaneously drew out the biggest Ginsu knives I'd ever seen.

I leaped ahead of my friends.

"Drop. The. Knives," I said in a voice that, for a second or two, actually made them stop grinning like jackals.

"Kill them," the leader commanded.

"But the boss said no taking humans yet."

"These aren't humans," he replied. "They're gnats."

"They're what?" asked his thickheaded henchman, apparently not knowing what a gnat was and taking him at his word.

"Just *get* them!" ordered the boss.

They sprang toward us, knives flashing. But they didn't realize who they were dealing with. While they were arguing about bugs, I had already decided exactly how I wanted to handle these guys. Having recently played one of the GC's rated-M-for-mature games, Extreme Cage Fighter VI, I morphed myself into one of the most legendary thugs in all video-game lore—Vito the Home Wrecker. Have I mentioned my ability to transform myself into any person or creature that my mind can adequately visualize?

My arms and legs grew long, muscles I didn't normally have rippled all over my body, my neck became massive, my jaw as square as a cinder block, and the next thing I knew I was nearly seven feet tall and over two hundred pounds. The alien thugs instantly recognized me—and my weapon of choice, an oversized baseball bat wrapped in razor wire.

"Vito?!" asked one of them, standing stock-still with the rest of his friends.

"Get off this bus," I growled, smashing my club against the floor and causing the bus to rock like we'd just driven over a land mine.

“And go tell your superiors that the *Alien Hunter* is here.”

“Only if I got your severed head in my hands to prove it!” one of the more dimwitted henchmen yelled. He sprang for me, but I was too quick. The bat smashed into him in midair, and he dropped like a stone.

“Who’s next?” I roared. “I’ve been dying for some batting practice.”

The jaws of their pathetic human-costume faces all fell open as I flexed my biceps, covered—as was most of my body—in tattoo portraits of Roman Catholic saints.

“GET OFF!!!” I yelled, and, even before I could cock my club for a second swing, they were clambering over each other to exit the narrow bus door, tails tucked firmly between their legs.

Chapter 7

luck?"

I nodded. I was getting pretty familiar with what bad luck looked like.

"Thank you for saving us, but we should get going," he said.

"Where will you go?" asked Dana.

"We don't know, but we'll rely on alien ingenuity, yes? We just need to keep moving."

"That's fine, except for one thing," I said, and turned and yelled to Emma. "How's the driver?"

"He'll be fine. Going to have a nice goose egg on the back of his head, but he'll be okay."

"Good. Come here and take a look at this man's shoulder. Those thugs were talking about 'acquiring targets,' right? And something about a hunt? Something makes me think they may have put a transponder in this man, and that we should take it out so they can be on their way without getting tracked down in, like, the next ten minutes."

Emma came back to us, asked the man to remove his button-down shirt, and examined his shoulder.

"I see where it must have gone in, but it's a tiny wound. Maybe a microfiber transmitter?"

"Can we get it out of him?"

"Sure. Why don't you just dematerialize it, Daniel?"

"Well, because I need to know what it is in order to do that. It's not like wishing it away, you know." That was true. I have to know exactly what it is I'm dealing with—and where it is—or it could be, um, a little dangerous. I mean, I didn't want to put an unnecessary hole in the man, or sever an artery.

"I trust you," said the man.

"I'm an alien hunter, not a surgeon, sir."

"You're the Alien Hunter—you can do *anything.*"

"Don't believe the hype," I replied. "My so-called powers only work when I have enough time to think something through, and when I truly *understand* what it is I'm trying to do."

Seriously—it's not as easy as you might think.

Chapter 8

if you're curious) and where they should be safe for a while.

"Take these and get your family out of the country," I said. "Things are about to get pretty hot here in Tokyo."

"I couldn't possibly take—"

"He made them out of thin air," Willy said. "It's not like you're *taking* anything from him. Trust me."

The man thought a moment, then nodded. Then we all hugged. What can I say? We Alpar Nokians are big into public displays of affection.

"Hurry," said Dana. "You may have destroyed it, but that transmitter was working for a few minutes there. Other killers may be on the way, even as we speak."

Chapter 9

climbing down off a bus with a homeless family.

"Will you just look at him?" Number 7 said. "So young, so firm, so vital, so—"

"Absolutely *delectable,*"

said Number 8, drooling into their shared bowl of soup.

"And soon to be the very last of his kind," said Number 7.

"As these annoying humans would have to admit about their caviar and truffles: *scarcity* is the very best seasoning."

"Well said, *Colin,*" Number 8 replied. "Let's savor this one *together,* shall we?"

"Absolutely, Ellie," said Number 7. And then, somehow, the two of them morphed into a shimmering cloud of gray specks that hovered over the bowl and consumed every last particle of soup.

And then they—or it—descended on the kitchen to eat the scraps.

Chapter 10

an inordinate amount of time on the bamboo floor—sparring, as they had been, with Eigi and his son, Kenshin.

Both for company and because generally there is safety in numbers, we had invited my fellow Alpar Nokians to spend the night with us before they headed off to Narita Airport in the morning.

The smart thing to do would have been to get some sleep—I had some aliens to hunt, and the Murkamis had a long flight ahead of them—but I guess I was just excited about having people from my home planet around. And what with us happening upon an abandoned martial arts studio, it seemed only natural that we would start talking about the martial arts. I've had quite a bit of training over the years, and the Murkamis professed to be slightly expert themselves—black belts, in fact, just like me. So, from there, it was only natural that all nine of us would end up on the dojo floor in a friendly little tournament. Right?

The only problem was that even though I had thought I'd be the one giving pointers, the clinic was clearly shaping up to be *for,* not *by,* me.

"Tell me," I said, rubbing my neck and getting back up as Miyu resumed a defensive crouch. "Exactly what part of Alpar Nok are you guys from?"

"We learned these martial arts here on Earth," said Eigi, helping Joe and Willy back to their unsteady feet. "Just as you did."

Well, that much I believed. If people on Alpar Nok had known how to fight like this, there'd be a lot more of us alive right now. Seriously, these guys knew every move in the book, and a bunch I'd never heard of. I guessed maybe that was the advantage of getting your training in Japan instead of from your imaginary father in America, as I had.

I untied the black belt from my waist and offered it to Miyu. Some may say I'm stubborn to a fault, but, believe me, I know when I'm outclassed.

"Honorable Alien Hunter," said Eigi, coming over to me. "There is no need to turn in your belt. You are a worthy opponent for any black belt of the second or third degree."

"So, you guys are like seventh degree or something?"

"Miyu is *forty*-seventh, but she is still young. The rest of us, as you might expect, are higher degrees than that. Would you like some training?"

I shrugged and looked over at my exhausted, demoralized friends. They were nodding their heads as vigorously as they could through the pain. I guessed it wouldn't hurt us any to pick up some tips.

Chapter 11

—a chapter of the Japanese translation of *The Great Gilly Hopkins*.

"You know," said Dana, "sometimes I forget that if we were on Alpar Nok, we'd still be living at home with our parents."

"On Alpar Nok—" I stopped, deciding not to remind her where she'd really be if she were still there… *dead*. Victim of one of the worst extraterrestrial invaders in the universe. "If we were back home, we might have been packed up in a crate like this family," I said. "That's why I'm here on Earth. That's why we're in Tokyo right now."

Dana looked at me, and I saw something in her eyes, an emotion I'm not sure I know what to call, but I knew whatever was going on behind her brilliant blues was intense. Maybe even as intense as the feeling in my chest right then. Why was my heart beating the way it was beating? Why did I feel apprehensive and excited and like I just wanted to keep talking with her all night and maybe we could even go for a walk and—

Dana smiled inscrutably and said good night, pulling her sleeping bag up over her head.

"Good night, Dana," I said and rolled over and sighed. I might be responsible for her existence, but clearly I had little or no control over what she did.

I refluffed my pillow for the eightieth time and wondered if I would ever fall asleep. Confusion about girls isn't exactly the most relaxing thing in the world, is it?

Chapter 12

hadn't been transported halfway across the galaxy—the last of its kind—because it was prone to giving up.

The hunter was gaining—maybe just ten yards behind now. The cat's eyes suddenly shone like high beams, and, right then, from glands in each of its hind legs, it sprayed two clouds of nitric acid into the air.

In an instant, the attacker's lungs convulsed in mortal pain, its organs spilling into one another as the powerful acid destroyed the membranes between them, causing the great insect-like beast to slam into the cobblestones and explode as if it were a water balloon filled with black yogurt.

The bird-cat trilled with satisfaction and shot straight up into the night, clearing the artfully stacked roofs of a pagoda, and then arcing south toward a massive oil refinery on the banks of Tokyo Harbor.

Chapter 13

atomize both skycar and cheating hunter.

The explosion attracted the attention of the four other hunters, who aimed and fired at the two who had first used their weapons. In a matter of seconds, an all-out alien war was taking place on the grounds of the refinery.

The bird-cat heard the explosion too—and then more weapon fire and shouting—and quickly fled east toward the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps its relentless pursuers would have trouble tracking it to the depths of the Mariana Trench.

But even as it readied itself to bound over the barbed-wire top of the chain-link fence and into the inky harbor beyond, two humanoid figures leaning against the hood of a limousine simultaneously fired high-intensity microwave ray guns.

Because microwaves travel at the speed of light, there was no escape this time. The rays converged, instantly incinerating the bird-cat, and thereby releasing all the raw galvanic energy the creature contained. A blue-white blast about thirty yards in diameter seared the eyes of anybody foolish enough to have been looking that way. A split second later, the entire refinery exploded in a mushroom cloud of superheated petrochemicals.

“That was unfortunate,” said Number 7 to Number 8, referring more to the loss of the priceless quarry than to the incineration of a handful of their high-paying club members. There were always more clients.

“But it had to be done,” replied Number 8 as they stashed their microwave ray guns in the trunk of the limo. “We can’t leave evidence around for the humans—or our Alien Hunter friend—just now.”

“So true, my dear,” said Number 7, getting behind the wheel and driving the limousine back toward Tokyo. “Surprise, after all, is the most crucial element in our plan.”

“Still, Colin,” said Number 8, “one can’t help but be saddened at being denied the chance to sample Mahlerian bird-cat kebabs.”

“I hear they don’t need much *hot* sauce, Ellie,” he replied, and they both broke out laughing.

Chapter 14

“Essentially, they’ve gotten their players so addicted that their habits force them to cross over into the real world,” continued Eigi.

“Like what we saw in that creepy theater,” Dana said quietly.

“In fact, these ‘winners’ are actually still willingly paying them for the experience,” Eigi went on. “They’re here to track quarry through the streets of Tokyo and all over Japan. That is, in fact, why *we* were brought here. We’re among the last of the Alpar Nokians—we’re close to extinction, too—so we qualify as prey. And so, of course, do you.”

“That’s *sick!*” bawled Emma, our official Animal Planet addict. “Why would they *do* that!?”

“Who can know the heart of the beast?” asked Eigi.

“A veterinary heart surgeon?” asked Joe, eliciting not a single laugh. This was *not* a funny situation.

Clearly, I needed to put a stop to this and take out Number 7 and Number 8. Both of them at once. Both of them, even though I hadn’t even managed to lay eyes on them yet, except in their human forms on television and on the Internet.

As if reading my mind—which maybe she can because, after all, she came out of it—Dana said, “Maybe we should back off and find some other way, Daniel.”

I ignored her. “Eigi, do you know where Number 7 and Number 8 live? Are they in the GC Tower?”

“Yes, I think they’re up on the top floor most of the time. We sometimes heard our guards saying things about going up to the penthouse, so I assume that’s where they stay.”

“You’re *not* going up there, Daniel,” said Dana.

“Well, not there, precisely,” I said to her with a wink.

Chapter 15

parenting websites. Weird. Boring, but weird.

I was just about to call it a night when I suffered the worst bout of vertigo ever. And it had nothing to do with the height or the unsteadiness of the horrible window-cleaning gondola.

Someone had just emerged from the private penthouse elevator and entered their suite. Someone with a striking resemblance to an overgrown mantis with wild dreadlocks and the most evil-looking eyes you could imagine.

It was Number 1—*The Prayer!*

My parents' killer… my ultimate nemesis… the darkest stain in all my nightmares.

Chapter 16

“But what if he time-travels back to Monday?” asked Number 7.

“I’ve seen to it that he can’t do any more of his time-travel tricks,” Number 1 said, annoyed. “Now do your job and *hunt him down.*”

“Yes, sensei,” said Number 7 and Number 8 in unison, bowing and backing away from him.

“And stop acting like humans!” screamed Number 1. “You two are taking this playacting too far. Between your tabloid antics and the way your so-called son’s been behaving lately, you’ll probably end up going native on me.”

“Of course, master,” said Number 7 and Number 8, like they shared voice. It was a little creepy how they did that, actually. Maybe it was a talent that came with being married a really long time…

“Listen to me!” Number 1 barked. “I cannot afford *any more* screw-ups. I’m having to spend enough time recruiting and training replacements for Numbers 6, 5, and 3 without worrying about two *more* openings to fill.”

“Don’t worry, master. We’re on schedule.”

“I need you to be more than *on* schedule. You need to be *ahead* of schedule,” said Number 1, straightening up to his full height and glaring down at the human-looking couple. “We’ve had an unfortunate setback,” he said. “A Pleionid has landed here on Earth.”

“A *Pleionid?*” asked Number 7.

I was familiar with the name. Pleionids were a species of legendary genius and unique telepathic abilities. Unfortunately, they were also complete pacifists and had offered next to no resistance when Outer One poachers had invaded their world. Theirs was one of those legendary extinctions, much like the dodo bird or the passenger pigeon here on Earth.

“But they’re extinct!!” blurted Number 8.

The impatient look Number 1 gave her was enough to remove any doubt. “I don’t care whether you kill it, or him, first—but by no means may you let them make contact with each other… unless it’s as ingredients in one of your meals. Do you understand me?”

Number 7 and Number 8’s ravenous, drooling expressions made it clear that there was no mission they’d have more willingly undertaken. For these two hunters of endangered species to receive a shot at one the most legendary of all interstellar creatures—

Number 1 backed in to the open elevator, his insect eyes now glowing red.

“Don’t even *think* of failing me.”

“Oh, no, master. We won’t!” they yelled as the polished stainless steel doors slid closed.

I gripped the railing of the window-cleaning gondola with both

hands. My head was spinning. Number 1 here in Tokyo? The monster that had killed my parents and probably orchestrated the near genocide of my race?

Had I really just seen him with my own eyes? Had I really just overheard his plans?

Or was it all a trick? Had Number 7 and Number 8 known I'd be watching? Was it just a red herring to throw me off? Was I really supposed to believe there was a living Pleionid somewhere in this city? And *what* was that part about how Number 1 had seen to it that I could no longer time-travel? I'd never doubted myself this much before. I didn't know what to believe…

But I didn't have any more time to ponder it right then. The elevator doors opened again and disgorged a figure far less intimidating yet in some ways more disturbing than Number 1.

Chapter 17

The boy spun around, a look approaching panic on his face.

"What!? They're extinct!"

"All but one. One that came here to interfere with our plans."

"But aren't they pacifists?"

"That may be, but we think it's intending to pass on information that our *non*pacifist enemies might use," explained his mother.

"All of that is immaterial," Number 7 jumped in. "The fact is that the hunt for the last Pleionid will be the stuff of legend, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for any hunter."

"In fact," said Number 8, "your father and I have been talking, and, since your sixteenth colony cycle is approaching, we think *you* should be *hunt leader* on this one."

"What a glorious first kill it could be for you!" said Number 7. "Much like my own, when I caught and killed the last Reticulated Shandlerite on Guldbrekker 11."

It looked to me like all the blood had drained from Kildare's face. "Sure, Dad. Say, I just remembered…" He hesitated, turning back to the private elevator. "I left some equipment at school. I have to go."

"Kildare! We've already talked about your *forgetting* things all of the time. We are not a family—much less a species—that *forgets* things."

"But I have to go get it or I won't be able to finish my science project."

"And then what?" asked his father. "I know we asked you to blend in and learn their ways; but this interest of yours in school—it's *unseemly,* Kildare."

"I can't blend in if I fail out."

"Well," said Number 8, looking quite human in her motherly disapproval, "make sure you're back in time for dinner. The hunt starts in two days, and you'll need extra rest so you'll be ready."

"Your first hunt! Ah, that'll get you past this school bug!" said Number 7, rubbing his hands together and leaning back in his computer chair.

Kildare grimaced and disappeared into the elevator.

"This will be just the thing to get him back on track," declared Number 7. "There's no way he'll be able to deny his heritage after tasting the thrill of *the hunt.*"

"I hope you're right," said Number 8. "Should we put up some fail-safes so he doesn't get hurt?"

"No, let him prove himself. If he doesn't rise to the challenge…"

"Of course, you're right, dear," said Number 8, coming up behind her husband and rubbing his shoulders. "We can always make another."

As Number 7 stood and began returning her affections, I quickly

turned off my “hearing” and looked away from their window. Not only am I really *not* into watching aliens smooch, but I didn’t have much time to figure out where their son was going. He was definitely up to something.

Fortunately, one thing faster than high-speed elevators is instantaneous teleportation. Of course, you have to know exactly where it is you’re teleporting to or you can find yourself lodged in a solid object, with some pretty unpleasant results. But by now, I’d made a thorough study of the GC building’s layout and knew exactly where the penthouse elevator stopped. In the blink of an eye, I disguised myself as a security guard and teleported myself to the lobby.

Only problem was, when the elevator doors opened up, Kildare wasn’t there.

Chapter 18

"Make a cleaning machine out of thin air?"

She nodded.

"I'm not going to tell you so that you have plausible deniability, okay?"

"What?"

"Somebody comes in here and asks you where that machine came from, and you can honestly say, 'I don't know.' Right?"

"I don't know how to thank you," she said, bowing to me over and over again as the white machine zipped around the room obliterating every piece of trash it encountered.

"Can you please tell me where that kid went? I promise I'm not here to hurt him."

She looked me in the eyes. "Well, if you *promise* not to harm him…. Sometimes he goes through *there*."

She was pointing at a metal grate—an air vent—in the wall. Judging by the worn hinges, it had been opened and closed many times.

"He's a nice boy," she said. "Not at all like his parents."

I nodded, popped the cover, and climbed down into the dark metal duct.

When I put my mind to it, I can make my nose more sensitive than a bloodhound's. I'm talking the ability to detect parts per *trillion*. It's a weird sensation, being able to smell things that strongly—and it can cause some serious nausea if you come across a bad odor like, you know, brussels sprouts—but it can be a huge help in cases like this where you're climbing around a skyscraper's branching ductwork in pitch dark.

I followed Kildare's scent, which was definitely not human, to a small room that was clearly his lair. I knew it was his, because I'm pretty well acquainted with the living habits of my race—not of Alpar Nokians but Teenage Boyians.

The small custodian's closet was dominated by a dangerous-looking mountain of clothing, shoes, and Snickers wrappers. To one side, a metal locker plastered with Linkin Park and other rock-band stickers had been turned on its side to support an Xbox 360 console, a flat-screen television, a broken remote control, and a pile of papers and school books.

I picked up one of the books and looked it over. It was a textbook with a close-up of a moth's face on the cover. I managed to translate the Japanese characters to "Zoology: A Complete Survey." "Kildare Gygax" was written inside the cover—both in Japanese characters and our more familiar Roman alphabet. Below that was the name and address of a local secondary school.

As I returned the book to the makeshift desk, I noticed that the

overturned locker was completely blocking the only door to the room. Did that mean that Kildare came and left only through the vent?

I understood the need for privacy—especially with parents like his—but it seemed like it would be pretty inconvenient to forever be clambering around in those dark, cramped vents to get in and out of here.

And why were there *two* sleeping bags, not one? And why was one so much smaller than the other?

I quickly examined them. They'd each been slept in, and recently. The bigger one smelled exactly like the trail in the vents and must have been Kildare's. But the little one—it could have been an infant's sleeping bag, and it smelled like nothing I'd ever come across. I mean, I don't even know what to compare it to. It was kind of sweet, but not like perfume and not like candy. It just smelled *good* somehow, if that makes any sense.

But there weren't any other clues, at least that I could find. If the big bag was Kildare's, whose was the little one? A little brother's?

I didn't have any idea what was going on. And what about Number 1? Had he just been checking in on Number 7 and Number 8, or was he here for something else? If he were to join forces with those two, the scales wouldn't just tip the wrong way; they'd fall right off the counter.

A chill ran down my spine, and I spun around, but no one was there.

Strange. Usually when I have the feeling that I'm being watched, I'm right.

Chapter 19

“This sure seems festive, Daniel,” said my mom. “What’s going on?”

“Attention, everybody,” I said, standing on the mahogany credenza and waving at Emma to turn down the sound on the Dance Dance Revolution game she and Pork Chop had begun to play on the room’s Wii console.

“As you know, we’re once again faced with what some might think is an insurmountable challenge. Not one, but *two* Listers are with us in Tokyo, and all signs suggest that they’re about to go critical. What you don’t know is that there may actually be *three* of them—they appear to have a son.”

“I’m really good with alien kids, you know,” said Joe. “Do you think they ever need a sitter?”

“And,” I continued, ignoring him, “if that weren’t enough, it appears that they might be getting some help from yet another Lister.”

“Another in the top ten?!” demanded Dana, putting down her iPhone and looking at me in disgust. “Which one?!”

“Umm,” I said, coughing out the answer. “Number 1.”

The expressions on their faces ran the emotional spectrum—from Willy’s steely defiance to Mom’s outright queasiness—but as I dropped that bombshell a uniform look of terror appeared.

“Let’s not lose our heads,” I said, forcing a smile. I had one more piece of news that I was quite certain none of them would see coming.

“Does anybody know the date?”

“April twenty-ninth,” said Joe.

“Not *that* date,” I said as the room began to shake and a noise like thunder filled our ears.

Chapter 20

Legend has it that the symphony is so affecting that it causes people to have visions. Seriously. I don't remember much from my last Gathering Day (when I was a toddler and by then living in Kansas), but they say you can't be exposed to the song and not have an out-of-body experience: seeing dead relatives, conversing with famous Alpar Nokians from history, or some other grand and enlightening vision.

Within a minute, even tough-as-nails Willy had tears streaming down his face. And I was just starting to go off into la-la land myself. I was beginning to smell the gunjun flowers of my home planet's high mountain plains and was even starting to see a herd of elephants coming toward me—when there was a knock on the door.

I quickly muted the orchestra, hid the parade, and leaped across the room, pressing myself along the wall next to the door.

Everybody was looking to me for some sign. I waved them into defensive positions. It was unlikely to be a noise complaint—I'd of course soundproofed the room so that the noise of this holographic parade wouldn't send hotel management into conniptions—but, then, who could it be? The only certain thing was that the visitor was uninvited.

And, quite possibly, most unwelcome.

Chapter 21

read my thoughts, then she might know when I thought embarrassing things about her, like how I thought she looked really beautiful right then and—

"I mean, not *most* of the time. Just sometimes, when you bring me in and out of existence. Maybe it's because I kind of come out of your mind. It makes sense that sometimes I bump into your thoughts then, you know?" I chuckled self-consciously, and then she continued to torture me by probing my innermost emotions.

"Yesterday when you brought us here to check out the GC Headquarters, you were filled with thoughts about Gathering Day. About how you last celebrated it with your parents in Kansas when you were a little boy and how incredible it was. It was really very touching," she said, taking my hand. I turned as red as a lobster in a pot of boiling water.

"I mean," she went on, "you're always thoughtful, Daniel, but thinking of this, remembering this—the loss of your civilization, your family, and the care you give to the others around you, even strangers—"

"Can Willy and the others also see my thoughts sometimes?"

"I don't think so," she guessed.

"That's so weird…" I started to wonder.

"Not as weird as what's about to happen," said a sinister voice just above us.

A massive head peered out over the curving eave of the hotel. The head of a very large insect. A praying mantis, to be precise. A praying mantis with dreadlocks.

"Number 1!!!!" screamed Dana.

Too late. Way too late.

Chapter 22

as either of your parents were. By your age, each of them was more formidable than you are. And, clearly, even the two of them never became a true threat, not *really*."

He held me out in front of him and looked into my flattened eyes.

"Still," he seethed, "there's no sense taking unnecessary risks."

And, with that, he extended his disgusting insect jaws, clamped them onto to me, and began to *blow*. He was filling me with foul alien breath! *He was inflating me*.

It was too disgusting to even contemplate, but my limbs and head started to regain their accustomed shape, and then—

Suddenly, I was standing on the balcony again with a nonflat Dana. My friends, the Murkamis, and my family were still inside watching the Gathering Day parade of elephants, listening to the orchestra.

Had that entire weird scene with Number 1 been just a Gathering Day vision?

I grabbed Dana's hand to make sure she was real. She was.

I never wanted to let go.

Chapter 23

Pleionid's home planet was discovered that entire armies of poachers descended and all but wiped them out.

A handful had been rescued by well-meaning agents of the Federation of Outer Ones and sequestered in "safe houses" around the universe, but, one by one, the few survivors had died of natural causes or had been hunted down. Speaking as a member of another decimated species, I had some sense for how hard it is to persevere under such circumstances.

But I also knew other things about the mind-set of a survivor. And I wondered if this last Pleionid might be willing to help prevent the same fate from befalling another innocent species—aka you humans. Plus, The Prayer had ordered Number 7 and Number 8 to keep the Pleionid away from me at all costs, so there must be something we could do to help each other.

I slung my book bag over my shoulder, adjusted my uniform's crisp lapels, and headed outside to join the similarly dressed schoolchildren of Japan. My mission? To befriend the son of Number 7 and Number 8.

I had a sneaking suspicion we had at least one enemy in common.

Chapter 24

But this kid they were shoving around was the child of the most powerful alien couple I'd ever encountered. And something told me, if push came to shove, he'd be able to take care of himself.

I slunk back out of sight and watched the scene from around the corner.

"You going to give us your homework, bug boy?" asked the ringleader.

"Of course, Ichi," replied Kildare without a trace of sarcasm or defiance. He produced a notebook from his bag. "You want me to copy it into your notebooks for you?"

"In *your* handwriting? Then the teacher would know it isn't ours, stupid," he barked, shoving Kildare harder this time.

I again fought the urge to go over and kick their butts and stayed out of sight where I was.

"Get that garbage can," the ringleader said, gesturing to a round plastic trash barrel just down the hall. Two of the little brutes got the can. And the next thing I knew, the five of them had taken Kildare's book bag, thrown it in the garbage, and shoved him, butt-first, into the can. He was wedged so far in that the crooks of his knees hung over one side and his armpits over another.

"Now put him up there," commanded the leader, pointing to the top of the trophy case. His hench-bullies looked at each other quizzically, and first one, then all of them started to laugh.

"Quickly!" the leader urged. They stopped laughing and hoisted the garbage can—with Kildare in it—atop the trophy case.

Then they fled down the hallway, one of them yelling, "Hey, somebody needs to take out the trash down here!"

With little choice but to wait for a janitor to discover him, Kildare was in quite a pickle. He could probably have toppled the can over by rocking his weight back and forth, but if he did that he'd plummet at least six feet to the concrete floor and might land on his head. Seriously, I couldn't envision any other way he could unwedge himself from the can. The human body has limitations, and extricating one from a round plastic waste barrel into which it has been forced butt-first is a biggie.

But he *wasn't* human, was he?

Why had he let a bunch of bullies do this to him? And why was he just sitting up there, slowly counting backward to himself in Japanese, "*Ju, kyu, hachi, shichi, roku, go, shi, san, ni, ichi—"*

When he reached zero, he drew a breath and—mindfreak—turned *gray* and then dissolved into little tiny particles. At least that's what it looked like to me.

I don't think I actually said "Holy frijoles!" out loud, but I must have inhaled or something, because his color and former shape

instantly returned and his head swiveled toward me, his piercing dark eyes locking on mine as a chill shot up my spine.

"Who *are* you!?" he wanted to know.

Chapter 25

He looked at me with a mixture of pity and impatience.

"As I'm sure you know, Daniel, there's a long history of bullying in high schools. And Japan's no exception. In fact, some statistics say we've got the worst juvenile bullying culture on earth."

I found that hard to believe. The population seemed so… mild mannered. "Really?"

"Really," he said. "Now, seriously, I'm losing feeling in my feet."

"I'll go get that ladder," I said, and went to retrieve it.

"So," he said after I came back, as I climbed up and somehow managed to help him out of the can without killing us both. "What's another gaijin doing in this place?"

"Umm, I just transferred. Parents moved here for work."

"What do they do?"

"Um," I said, suddenly realizing there was a danger in seeming *too* stupid. "They, um, handle personnel training for a nongovernmental organization."

"Oh," he said. "Well, I didn't think I'd seen you before."

"Yeah, well," I said, "it's not like I tend to make a big impression on people anyway."

"Just the fact that you're talking to me is all the impression I need," Kildare said, fishing his book bag out of the bottom of the trash barrel. He put it on his back and made the weirdest noise—it was a like a cross between a sneeze and a cat's purr.

"Odaiji ni," I said.

"What?!"

"It means 'bless you'—you know, what you say when somebody sneezes."

"I didn't sneeze," he said, starting to turn red.

"Oh," I said, not quite sure how to respond.

"Anyhow, thanks for the help."

"You're welcome," I said, meaning it quite sincerely. Other than making weird sneezing noises and then denying them, he seemed like a nice, grounded kid. I mean, I wasn't exactly going to let my guard down to a child of two top-ten List aliens, but…

"Say, what class do you have next?" I asked.

"Introductory zoology," he said.

"Really?" I said, whipping out a class schedule and pretending to read the same course. "Me, too. Can you show me where it is?"

"Sure," he said. "But I suggest you not walk in with me. Ichi's in that class. In fact, that's kind of why he and his friends stuck me in the garbage can. They wanted to borrow my homework."

" 'Borrow,' huh?" I said.

"Yeah, well, there are worse things," he said.

"Like what?"

“Well, if you’re still intent on coming to class with me, I’m sure you’ll see them do something worse than that. They’re especially rough on new kids.”

Chapter 26

continued to draw the common elements of moth wings.

Kildare looked like he was just going to suck up the pain. I, however, had reached my breaking point. I was going to teach this bully a lesson about entomology.

I turned my attention to the hundreds of butterflies and moths on their display mounts on the table in front of Professor Kuniyoshi. Then with my mind I popped the pins from their wings and *brought them back from the dead.*

First one, then another, then every single specimen in the collection twitched, quivered, fluttered, and flew up into the air.

The entire class sat up and watched, openmouthed, as the butterflies gathered in an enormous colorful cloud in the middle of the room.

And then, en masse, they streaked to the back of the class and began to dive-bomb Ichi's spiky-haired head.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah!" screamed Ichi in a voice so piercing and panicked he sounded more like a seven-year-old girl than a fourteen-year-old thug. "Get them off!!"

He leaped from his chair, swatting wildly about his head.

This time when poor Professor Kuniyoshi turned around, he didn't fail to notice what was happening. But he didn't quite know what to do about it.

"My collection?" He gasped. "My butterflies? Ichi, what are you doing to my butterflies?! Don't you dare harm my specimens, young man!"

"Get them off me!" shrieked Ichi, running laps around the room now. They weren't really hurting him, of course, but Ichi was apparently scared enough to fear the worst.

The rest of the class, including Ichi's so-called friends, were roaring with laughter. Everybody, that is, except for Kildare, who had turned around in his seat and was *staring right at me*.

Chapter 27

"*Make* me," he commanded in a voice that sent chills down my spine. He was challenging me as part of our ongoing training exercises, but I don't think he realized how truly exhausted I was.

Just as I was about to tell him he was seconds away from being dematerialized—stored in the lower levels of my consciousness until I needed him again—he grabbed me with one hand and flung me across the room into a Noguchi glass coffee table, which promptly shattered.

"Ouch. What the *heck?!*"

I struggled to my feet, anger boiling inside me. It was one thing to keep me on my toes, but it was another to take advantage of a tired kid who'd already had a pretty rough day.

"Look, Dad. That wasn't funny, and—"

"You might want to dive through, Daniel," he suggested.

"Dive through? What's that supposed to mean?"

By way of reply, he deftly aimed the Opus 24/24 at me and squeezed the trigger.

Chapter 28

think—"

"Oh, you *don't think?*" he said mockingly, waving his arms and somehow casting us both backward in time, slowly at first, and then faster, faster, faster.

In a blink, we were watching my arrival at the hotel, and then the guest before me, a businessman of some sort, and then back to the one before that, and the one before that and then—*bam!*—there were soldiers around. American soldiers. And there was some military dude I recognized in khakis smoking a corncob pipe. General Douglas MacArthur? The man who'd been entrusted with Japan's recovery after World War II and had helped start the nation on one of the world's most remarkable comebacks of all time.

I could have yelled hello, but then—*bam!*—the hotel was being built, and we were hovering in the air over the horses and carts of the nineteenth-century construction crew, and then—*bam!*—we were hovering over the previous building on the site, maybe a hotel too but shorter? and then—*bam!*—we were back back to when the site was occupied by a small, curved-roof house and there was a big stone castle not far away. Just then the earth started to shake. I looked off in the distance and saw a huge black cloud exploding out of Mount Fuji —it must be the famous eruption of 1707!

Before I could scramble for cover—*bam!*—we were at a camp of ancient Japanese soldiers armed with wooden spears and polished stone axes, and then—*bam!*—back to pristine forest. And then—*bam!* —back to some sort of ice age and we were on a glacier, and then the glacier was gone and there was a grassland, and then a forest with really weird trees, and then—

"This should do," said my father, looking around at the primitive jungle. "So, Daniel, it's time you got caught up on your homework. What do you know for a fact about Number 7 and Number 8?"

"They run a video-game company, live in Tokyo, have a son, a really nice apartment, and they like to hunt and eat endangered aliens?"

"So what puts them in the List's top ten?"

"They're plotting to decimate the human race by brainwashing kids to become killing machines like the ones in their video games."

"You mean to go after them, and *this* is all you know? What's the rest of their plan? How will they initiate it? How do you know it hasn't already begun?"

"Well—" I started to say, but I knew he was right. Had I ever been this badly underprepared for anything?

"And how about Number 1?" he asked me. "We've heard he's been in town recently. What have you learned about him after all these years on the same planet with him?"

“You mean other than that he can give a person bad nightmares?”

“What do you know about him in terms of his abilities or physical appearances—”

“Well, he has dreadlocks, red bug eyes, looks like a big giant praying mantis—”

“Always?”

“Well, the List computer says he’s a shape-shifter—”

“So, he could, in theory, look like *this?*” asked my father, morphing into a twenty-foot-tall carnivorous dinosaur with red bug eyes and dreadlocks.

“Run, Daniel. *Run,*” he roared.

I didn’t ask. I just did.

Chapter 29

situation."

I didn't have a chance to think it through right then. *Bam!* Dad was now back as his usual self, and we were standing in the future—*way* in the future by the looks of it. We were in some sort of high-tech, robot-operated assembly plant with silver Honda logos all over the place. Laser saws, titanium rivet guns, and ceramic shears were slicing, dicing, puncturing, folding, and hammering large shapes out of metal, carbon fiber, glass, and plastic all around us.

This was clearly a place for machines, not people. The air was stifling hot and smelled of sulfur, but worse than the air was the noise. *Deafening* is too weak a word. It felt like hammers landing on the sides of my head. It was too loud to do anything, much less think, and I almost didn't notice Dad leveling the Opus 24/24 at me again.

I leaped backward, landing on a high-speed conveyor belt as the blast ricocheted off a junction box and hit an assembly robot. The poor thing actually seemed to scream as it burst into a thousand pieces.

I smiled triumphantly back at my father.

I couldn't hear him, but it was easy enough to read his lips: "You only earn a question when you *survive!*" was what he said.

I rolled over just in time to notice I was being whisked into an enormous laser cutter.

I thought quickly. I knew from my studies that lasers are made of light and therefore will pass harmlessly through anything that's perfectly clear. I rearranged my molecules to be transparent to visible radiation, and, sure enough, I passed through the machine and emerged on the other side entirely intact—well, except for my book bag, which I'd kind of forgotten to make invisible with the rest of me.

I swiftly hopped off the conveyor belt and flung the flaming thing to the ground before it burned my back. At least my teachers wouldn't have to hear that the dog ate my homework.

Suddenly, the machines stopped and quiet returned, except for the ringing in my ears. Dad had paused time once again.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've earned yourself another question. Ready?"

I nodded wearily.

"Who said, 'Success is 99 percent failure'?"

My mind was blank. I was thinking it was somebody Japanese, but—

"Answer the question, Daniel, or if you'd rather, we can play this level again."

I racked my brains and did a quick search through the virtual Wikipedia I'd installed in my head. "Um," I said, playing it cool, so Dad didn't discover I had kind of, sort of, cheated. "Soichiro Honda,

the guy who started the manufacturing company."

"And I trust you see why that, too, is applicable to your current situation."

"You mean I should assume Number 1's going to have some serious failures coming soon because he's had 99 percent successes so far?"

"I'm saying you can profit from your mistakes."

"Ah," I said, not following him, but once again not exactly having enough time to speculate. Because now I was standing on what looked to be a near present-day Tokyo street. Judging by the big white-and-orange concrete barriers lining it, it looked like it was closed off for a Grand Prix street-race course.

"Next question," Dad continued. "What two words did General MacArthur, supreme commander of Japan in the years after World War II, say summed up the history of failure in war?"

This one I knew all too well.

"Too late," I said.

Dad nodded and was gone.

My ears were still ringing from the car factory, but I detected a sort of roaring, thunder-like sound in the distance. And it was getting louder by the second.

Chapter 30

the location and nature of every molecule in their bodies, because if you make any bad assumptions, well… just be sure to bring a bucket and a mop.

So that meant right then I had somewhere on the order of 1.043 seconds in which to physically carry her out of harm's way.

She started to grab me as I turned and glanced into the yellows of the approaching demons' loathsome eyes. I quickly calculated the leap I was going to have to make to get us airborne and to safety. But there was something wrong with how she was holding on to me—something *painfully* wrong. I turned to look at her and saw what it was.

She was no longer a cute little girl with a cute little stuffed animal in her arms; she was a long-tailed, red-skinned demon—a demon with very sharp teeth that she had just sunk into my left arm. The pain was beyond anything I'd ever experienced. To complicate matters, the Hello Kitty doll had grown an evil monobrow and six-inch-long claws that it was using to climb up my back, probably so it could slice my throat.

Time seemed to slow, and all the panicked stretched-out split-seconds made me realize that, aside from the raging pain of being bitten and clawed, (a) I could no longer leap clear of the oncoming motorcycles, at least without leaving my arm behind, and (b) I was about to become 110 pounds of alien roadkill.

I was about to die.

I couldn't believe it. I'd come this far and then, just like that, it was the end.

Only, of course, it wasn't exactly.

The scene disappeared, and I was back in my deluxe suite at the Fujiya Hotel with Dad.

"Daniel," said Dad in a sad voice, "if this training exercise had been a test at school, you would have received a forty-seven point four out of a hundred. In other words, an F. It's entirely clear that you can't possibly win against Number 7 and Number 8 right now, much less with Number 1 in the picture. You should leave Japan. Immediately."

"But I can dive back through time and take it again, can't I?"

He shook his head. "No. No, you can't, Daniel. These training exercises are all in your mind. You'll see that if you try it in real life, you won't be able to. Since your last adventure, Number 1 has put a disruption field over the entire planet."

"What the heck does that mean?" I asked, suddenly remembering what Number 1 had told Number 7 and Number 8.

"It means you couldn't time-travel if you tried."

"I don't believe you!" I said, and tried to visualize the surface of time so I could dive through. I was going to jump back thirty seconds,

just to prove my point; but I couldn't see it! Everything was gray and filled with static, like an old TV set when you don't have a good signal.

"You see?" asked my father. "Leave Japan, Daniel. There's no hope for you this time."

"I can do it anyway," I insisted.

But there was nobody there to hear me. Dad was gone.

Chapter 31

When nobody was looking, I transformed myself and flew over to the uniformed shoulder of a passing teenage boy who, sure enough, was headed straight into the GC flagship store for an early-morning video-game session before heading off to school.

Now I just needed to hope that Number 7 and Number 8 weren't as high-tech with the building's pest control as they were about other things.

Chapter 32

“A Pleionid,” replied Number 7, cutting short the welter of speculation as if he’d fired a gunshot.

The thugs straightened in their chairs and went wide-eyed, or, if they didn’t have eyes, widened other things.

“But—” began the tall one I’d ridden in on.

“No, they’re *not* quite extinct,” said Number 7. “There’s one left. And it’s here—here in Japan.”

The hunters looked like they were about to break into applause, but Number 7 would have none of it.

“The mission brief, which I’ll feed into your consoles at sundown, will contain a link to the creature’s location. Because of its shape-shifting and self-healing abilities, we couldn’t use a traditional transponder. Nevertheless, we have another way to track the creature that will allow us to send you rough coordinates.”

A murmur of speculation rippled through the room. I too wondered how they might be tracking the Pleionid.

“Also,” said Number 7, glancing at Number 8, “to make things even more challenging, a new hunter will join us tonight, a truly formidable competitor.”

“Who is it? Is he here?” asked one of the hunters.

“You’ll see.”

“This sounds like a tough assignment,” said another. “Are there any special incentives?”

“First of all,” said Number 7, standing to his full height and briefly, somehow, turning a disturbing shade of gray, “this is not an *assignment.* This is a *hunt.* All of you signed up for this. But, yes, if you like to think in terms of what’s in it for you, I can tell you that whoever successfully kills the Pleionid”—he paused dramatically—“not only gets the trophy, but *gets to live.*”

Now it was every other alien in the room’s opportunity to turn gray.

“You mean—?” began one of them, an owl-headed goon with eyes like mirrored lawn balls.

“I should clarify,” continued Number 7. “Because of your miserable failure with the Mahlerian bird-cat, it has been decided to thin your ranks and recruit new players. Those of you who fail to bring down the Pleionid will be *terminated.*”

Another ripple of shock and surprise rounded the room, but not as quickly as I would have expected in a group that was just told they were about to die. One of them, with a face like a giant squirrel—if the squirrel didn’t have any hair on its face (*very* creepy)—was even smirking.

“I don’t care. I’ve been getting pretty tired of this game,” he said.

Number 7 smiled. “What, you mean this 5G edition of

Intergalactic Safari Hunter?"

"Duh," said the creepy squirrel.

"Do you know what '5G' means?"

"Fifth Generation," said the owl-headed goon. "It's a marketing thing to make it sound advanced, right?"

"Actually, it's a number we developers use to indicate the final phase of a video-game arc. Previous generations of the program entice players to continue, thereby helping us to optimize programming to ensure we have maximized its addictive properties.

"For instance, with the humans, right now we're up to the 4G version. The next edition will be the 5G, just like yours."

"So?" said the freaky squirrel.

"So," said Number 7, "at 5G, it stops being a game. And when we release that edition here—as we've done on several planets before, including your own—all the world's gamers are going to start acting out the ultraviolent competitions we lay before them in *real* life."

So that was how they were going to make humans extinct. They were going to turn all the first-person shooting and war games into the real thing. The game players of the world would go berserk across the planet.

"What does that mean for us?" asked the owl-headed one.

"Have you tried to pause the game lately? Tried to get up from your machine and go get a snack?"

The aliens looked a degree more nervous. Some of them nodded gloomily.

"You see, now you are not playing Intergalactic Safari Hunter. You are *living* it. This is not your video-game self—this is your *real* self. In other words, no more restarting the level if you happen to die."

You could almost hear the sickening realizations dawn around the boardroom table. This was why they hadn't been able to pause the game. This was why everything had seemed so real. And this was why Number 7's threat to terminate them should be taken seriously.

I wasn't sure what kind of a long-term management technique it was, but something told me that Number 7 had just lit quite a motivating little fire under these greedy, selfish aliens, and that this night's hunt was going to be particularly hard fought.

That poor Pleionid didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell, whatever its abilities were. I cleaned my eyes and flicked my wings, which I guess is the fly equivalent of a discouraged head shake.

"How disgusting!" screeched Number 8. "A fly! There on that hat! Somebody vaporize it!"

Uh-oh.

Chapter 33

“I’d never go back on my word…”

“You’re so full of it. That’s it; I’m staying right here. You guys couldn’t hunt your way out of a paper bag anyway.”

I guessed Number 7 and Number 8 knew a thing or two about the psychological makeups of these selfish hunters. There was no way they would abandon this opportunity to hunt one of the universe’s most legendary creatures if it meant letting somebody else have the chance.

I dropped back onto my favorite hat and rode it down to the lobby.

The aliens exited the building together, but as soon as they’d stepped out into the bright Tokyo morning, they all took off in different directions. Mine, after checking to make sure nobody was following him, crossed the plaza and loped down the avenue to a noodle shop just a block away from the big Japanese Rail train station.

I’m not usually a soup fanatic, but I guess my fly senses were tuned a little differently than my regular ones. As it was, the place smelled so good I almost drowned in my own fly drool, and it was only through an act of sheer will that I kept my wits about me and resisted the temptation to dive-bomb somebody’s udon noodles.

I kept looking around the narrow restaurant, expecting to pick out another alien in the crowd, but everyone seemed to be distinctly human. Everyone, that is, except for the counter girl who soon came to take my alien’s order.

“Dana!?” I squeaked.

Fortunately, I was a fly, and nobody could hear me.

Chapter 34

whispered, “please time it to arrive exactly when you bring lunch to that gentleman down the counter.”

I pulled out my iPhone and pretended to read some manga while Dana went back to the kitchen. In a moment she returned with a very large—I’m talking bigger than her head—bowl of soup, and carried it down the counter.

I tensed, ready to spring to action.

“Here’s your soup, sir,” she said, placing the bowl of soup on the counter in front of the alien.

“Fine,” he muttered without glancing it up. “Leave it there.”

“Would you like some hot sauce?”

He looked up from the tracking device and glared. “I *said* I wanted it spicy—*of course* I want hot sauce.”

“Very good, sir,” said Dana, reaching under the counter and pulling out a bottle of shishito chili oil. “Will this do?”

He squinted down at the bottle’s label and nodded. But, as he did, Dana squeezed the full bottle ever so slightly, causing a single droplet of the oil to spurt out and into the alien’s left eye.

Shishito chilies are legendary for their potency, and after handling them Japanese cooks know very well not to touch their faces, particularly their eyes. The stinging and burning can be so intense that temporary blindness often results.

With a muffled yelp, the hunter dropped the tracking device onto the counter and jammed his washcloth into his eye, rubbing furiously and shouting all manner of alien curse words. If it hadn’t been a brightly lit, crowded restaurant, I’m sure he would have leaped across the counter and throttled Dana without a moment’s hesitation.

Instead, he snarled at her: “Would you… please… get me… a clean *washcloth!*”

I quickly transformed a stack of napkins into something that looked exactly like his tracking device. And then it was a simple matter of sidling up behind him and making the old switcheroo while Dana hurried to get him a clean cloth so he could dab his eye.

“You are a fool,” he spat out as he ripped the towel from her hands.

“A thousand apologies, good sir,” she said. “May I offer you a free cup of tea?”

“You can offer me nothing, you pathetic lower life-form,” he grumbled. He was about to say something more hostile than that, but he stopped himself. Instead, he grabbed his newly replaced tracking device and stormed out of the restaurant.

“This is some excellent seaweed soup,” I told Dana as she passed me the check.

“I thought you’d like it.” She smiled as I shelled out the

appropriate combination of yen notes and coins and scribbled some instructions on the back of the check for her to meet me outside.

Chapter 35

our eyes. Impossibly, it seemed to be a *living* molecule.

Now the screen showed the Pleionid home world of today: a gray, dusty cinder of a planet. Just another burned-out orb, like so many others the Outer Ones had left in their wake.

Emma was practically sobbing at the sight, and the rest of us weren't far behind. Joe shut off the feed.

"Anything else, Joe?" I asked.

"They haven't activated the tracking program yet, but it should work once they release the activation code. And I think I've figured out how to triangulate any signal we get on the Pleionid—hopefully that will help us find it before the other hunters do."

"What about intelligence on the other safari hunters, or on Number 7 and Number 8?"

"Nothing really, but there's one image here…"

And right then, the screen lit up with a headshot of another alien. An all-too-familiar and disturbing one.

It was a high-res photo of *me*.

BOOK TWO

SEE YOU LATER, SPACE INVADER

Chapter 36

terrarium. With all my senses on high alert—ready to fight or take flight as the circumstances dictated—I approached and cleared my throat.

He whipped around so fast, I swear, even the ants in the terrarium jumped in surprise.

Chapter 37

“Big Edward O. Wilson fan, dedicated Discovery Channel viewer, and budding entomologist, I guess,” I improvised.

“Me, too.” He smiled and turned back to the ants. “Actually, you’re right about their dietary habits,” he went on. “More than ninety-eight percent of what ants eat is vegetative or already dead. Some species can and do hunt other living animals, but their reputation as predators is grossly exaggerated.”

“And that’s a good thing,” I said, “considering they represent more than fifteen percent of the biomass of all creatures on Earth—more than ten times that of all living humans—or they might eat us all up.”

“Yes,” he said, looking up at me again with a curious smile. “It’s a very good thing.”

Just then, the door opened and Professor Kuniyoshi came in with two students.

“Ah, Kildare,” he said. “How’s the colony?”

“Very healthy, Professor,” replied Kildare. “I expect they’ll soon be fledging.”

“Good news, good news!” beamed the teacher, taking the two students to his desk to review some papers.

Kildare remained focused on the ants, perfectly content not to talk. I couldn’t help liking him, but he was definitely an intense kid. There’s an old Japanese saying—still waters run deep—and something told me I hadn’t a clue what lay in the depths of Kildare’s personality.

Chapter 38

of the train, in case Kildare happened to look back in my direction. Only problem was I forgot to materialize at a speed relative to the ground. That meant I was still traveling as fast as the bullet train.

Yeah, over one hundred miles per hour. Ouch is right.

I bounced and rolled like one of those Olympic downhill skiers who wipes out halfway through the course, only my wipeout was in a muddy, flat field. It was a good thing I'm a pretty sturdily built kid and that there weren't any trees. It was also a good thing Kildare was too far away to hear me crash to the ground.

Once I'd determined I wasn't mortally wounded, I turned myself into a butterfly whose anatomy I'd fortunately had occasion to memorize from Professor Kuniyoshi's collection. I caught up with Kildare just as he made his way to a moss-covered old Buddhist lantern at the edge of a small field.

The timing was good, because what happened there was something I really had to see with my own eyes. As Kildare approached the stone lantern and placed his hand on it, the moss began to move—*and talk!*

Chapter 39

world just like one of its billions of innocuous insects.

Chapter 40

breaking into bubbly giggles again. “Can’t be too cautious!”

And, with that, it was gone. Or, rather, it would have seemed gone if I hadn’t been aware of some of its abilities and known what to look for. A nearly-impossible-to-detect flicker of motion, like the faintest breath of wind in the grass, was racing across the field.

“Where’s it going?” I yelled back at Kildare, already sprinting after the Pleionid.

“You’ll have to catch him to find out!” Kildare shouted, fading away behind me as I hit—thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty miles per hour—trying desperately to catch up.

It was racing right for the train tracks, which, I quickly realized, were about to be occupied by a Tokyo-bound *shinkansen,* hurtling our way at more than a hundred miles per hour.

I put on an additional burst of speed, sending up a rooster-tail of mud and rice plants behind me. I felt a little bad—some farmer was going to be upset at the furrow I was making through his paddy—but there wasn’t time to apologize or to fix things right then.

I was just a dozen or so yards behind the Pleionid when I realized it was aiming to cross the tracks a split second ahead of the approaching bullet train, thereby trapping me on the other side of it or, perhaps, leaving me smeared across its pointed nose.

Fortunately, I happen to be able to leap higher than a speeding locomotive. *Un*fortunately, as I cleared the hurtling train, I didn’t see any sign of the Pleionid.

What I did see was an alien I recognized from the GC Tower boardroom.

A *hunter*.

Chapter 41

one have certain defense mechanisms I'd failed to anticipate. I won't give you the blow-by-blow on what happened next, because it gets a little gross, and your parents or teachers might take this book away from you if I spelled it out in too much detail. But let's just say this particular breed of alien—the Dookian—when under duress, is apt to spray the highly caustic contents of its intestines at its attacker.

The long and the short of it is that this one did it *to me,* and it was easily the single-most-disgusting experience of my life. Fortunately, however, it wasn't fatal and didn't prevent me from karate-chopping him into the next prefecture.

When I was done cleaning his repulsive goo off me—I had to materialize a full case and a half of Handi Wipes to get the job done—I found the tracking unit he'd hacked and quickly determined that the Pleionid had already gotten thirty miles ahead of me, heading east toward Narita Airport.

I took off running at a comfortable two hundred miles per hour (any faster and I usually get a bit of a headache from the concentration it takes not to trip). Soon, I was closing in on my quarry.

But it wasn't headed quite all the way to Narita Airport. Instead, it stopped in the middle of a beautiful garden in the town of Ushiku. But it wasn't the plantings that were the most noteworthy feature of the place. That distinction went to a bronze man who happened to be taller than Godzilla.

Chapter 42

screen, it had somehow crossed through. Another trick I'd love to figure out.

"Danaus plexippus," it said simply.

"What the—?" I said, with my typical articulateness.

"Your species of butterfly, Alien Hunter," it replied, its voice disarmingly rich and wise-sounding. "But why don't you turn yourself back into your human form. Your insect voice is hard for me to discern with the wind blowing up here."

Oh, yeah. I forgot I was a butterfly. I turned myself back into my human form and looked down at the big-eyed, furry-skinned creature.

"Sorry for all the running," it said.

"No big deal," I replied, although I realized as I collapsed to the cool bronze floor that I was pretty darn sore from that little chase. "I'm thinking of taking up cross-country in the fall."

"Cross-country?"

"Running for school. It's a sport. You run outside."

"Ah, well," it said. "Now I have a sense for your 'cross-country' abilities. That was one reason why I had you chase me. To make sure that you were indeed the Alien Hunter. But also I needed to teach you something."

"Teach me?"

"Yes, Alien Hunter, teach you. My time is short. And we must ensure that yours is not."

"But you're safe for now. Why can't we just get you away from here, someplace where they can't find you?"

"As should be quite obvious from the fact that I am the very last, we Pleionids don't live forever. Now, give me your hand."

I laid my hand in its hand, thinking this couldn't possibly be a trap—and it wasn't. But what happened next was the last possible thing I would have expected.

My mind was bathed in color, light, shapes, motions, incredible beauty, unbearable sadness, and—most of all—an amazing depth of *understanding* I'd never experienced before.

Suddenly, I saw how Pleionids had harnessed the chemistry of pleiochromatech to change shape, to make themselves practically invisible, to squeeze through tiny crevices, to radiate color, to share thoughts *by touch.* Most stunning of all, it gave me a glimpse of the true beauty of our universe—and of the horror of the threats that face it.

In short, it gave me the biggest mojo download of my whole life.

"Wh-wha—"

"Don't say a word," it urged, smiling up at me faintly and pulling its hand away. "I have to go now. And this time, don't follow, okay?"

My mind was still wading through a newfound sea of light and

knowledge, and all I could do was nod and stutter my thanks.

"Don't forget the good, Daniel," the Pleionid said. "And now, if you would, please *duck!*"

Chapter 43

your squadmates to fan out.

Wait a minute. They were supposed to be solo agents. So why were they working *together*? I could hear them racking and priming their weapons and in a moment the whole place stunk of ozone and molten metal as a half dozen plasma pulses arced through the darkness toward me.

Still reeling from the horrific vision of the black shadow of death swallowing that beatific little creature, I somehow managed to leap over their heads, grab a lateral girder, and pivot myself down through the darkness to the interior roof of the viewing room, a few stories below. I can only imagine what the tourists inside thought when hearing all the thumps, weapon pulses, and shouting over their heads.

And then there was an awful whine, a whine I knew from dreams as well as I did from real life—one of those conscienceless alien poachers was priming an *Opus 24/24!*

Great. This was just great. Human civilians under my feet, a sacred metal statue all around me, a half dozen aliens working together to blow my brains out, and I was so tired and disoriented and scared I could barely see straight. Some superhero I was turning out to be. If the cards continued to fall like this, I would be responsible for the untimely deaths of more than a hundred innocent souls.

Then in a flash, I realized the Opus 24/24 was no longer charging, which meant it would soon be *firing*.

I leaped up as a pulse of pure pain arced from a saw-toothed muzzle, and evil yellow tendrils blossomed across the interior metalwork of the statue.

Normally I would have stood my ground, normally I would have been happy to go down swinging, but normally I wasn't living with the burden of just having witnessed the death of the last member of a legendary—and irreplaceable—alien species. I couldn't even think straight. Heck, I probably would have had trouble tying my shoelaces right then, I was so freaked out.

And then it came to me—pleiochromatech. I'd just been shown how to make it and how it worked. I didn't need to fight; I could *hide*.

I dove down into the wealth of knowledge the Pleoinid had just given me… and through an act of sheer will that I don't know how to explain, I flattened myself into a slick of invisible flesh, and slid down into the darkness while my pursuers raged with frustration.

Chapter 44

“You’re going to go make my father change his mind?”

“Better than that. You and I are going to take one of the most important courses of study that school offers.”

“But I told you, my dad’s not letting me go.”

“This is an off-campus course.”

He looked at me skeptically. “Oh yeah? What’s it called?”

“Introduction to…*hooky*.”

Chapter 45

or anything, but all those millions of blossoms—and how the petals rained down like a snowstorm when the wind blew—it's just one of those things you have to see to believe.

What was *not* so cool to see, however, was that on that particular spring afternoon, for every one of the thousands of blossoms on each of the trees, there had to be at least one tourist crammed into the park.

Plus, one alien safari hunter.

And believe me, one was enough. As luck would have it, it was the tall one whose hat I'd ridden on in the GC Tower elevator and whose tracking device I'd stolen. He was attempting to blend in as a forty-something man who happened to stand six feet eight inches tall and looked like he had broken glass under his skin.

We were just walking past the life-size model of a blue whale in front of the natural history museum when I spotted him. I grabbed Kildare's arm. I didn't need to offer a word of explanation as I steered him quickly away from the crowds toward the safety of a nearby shrine that had been roped off for the blossom festival.

As is customary, we washed our hands in the ablution pool outside the shrine.

"Should we stop the charade, Daniel?" he whispered as he filled his ladle with the cold water streaming from a spigot in the mouth of an ornately cast copper dragon.

"Of course, Kildare," I said.

"You aren't here to kill me; I can tell that much."

"That's true—and I'm sorry we haven't talked openly before. I just, well—"

"It's my fault too. Things are just so messed up. My parents—"

I nodded. It was definitely a delicate situation. Which was of course why we hadn't talked about it, even though obviously we'd both known each others' true identities all along.

"I hope it's okay. I feel bad—"

"They killed the Pleionid already, didn't they?"

I nodded.

"I felt it."

"Look," I said. "Is there anything you can tell me that will, um—"

"I know they have to be stopped, Daniel. But just give me a day. I think I may know a way to do it without resorting to, you know—"

"Okay. But what are you thinking?"

"I can sabotage my parents' plans."

"You mean like when you set the Murkami family free?" I asked, giving voice to a hunch.

He nodded.

“Steps like that aren’t enough, Kildare. They have too much in motion now for us to be doing guerrilla stuff. They’re too strong. We have to step it up. How many others will they hunt to extinction?”

“Well,” said Kildare. “I’ll give you one thing you may find useful if, you know, my plan doesn’t work.”

“Please. Anything.”

He nodded as he ladled some more water over his hands. “Do you like the ocean?”

“What?”

“Oh, crap!”

He was staring across the pool. I followed his horror-stricken gaze and saw Ellie and Colin Gygax—his parents, Number 7 and Number 8 on The List of Alien Outlaws on Terra Firma—coming up the stone path toward us. They did not look happy.

Chapter 46

"*Sure* he does, son," said Number 7. "That must be why they call him the *Alien Hunter.*"

"It's not very nice pretending to be somebody's friend like that," said Number 8, casting a reproachful glance my way. "But what would you expect from an Alpar Nokian?"

"Yes, cold-blooded killers, all of them. He was just using you so he could find out more about us—so he could more easily hunt our family," said Number 7.

"Yes, isn't that one of the first things they teach you as an Alien Hunter—to *know your prey?*"

"At least his version of hunting involves saving lives; not killing for *sport,*" Kildare shouted.

"So he wants to *kill* us to *save* lives?" replied Number 7. "Perhaps he should consider taking a course in logic?"

"Or," continued Number 8, "perhaps now that he knows more about us, he should just throw in the towel?"

"Yes, perhaps," said Number 7, "he's beginning to realize we're a bit more trouble than we're worth."

"Unless," continued Number 8, suddenly turning to me, "you need some more convincing?"

"Like," said Number 7, "maybe it would help you to know that we're not who we appear to be?"

"That we're colonial beings," said Number 8, "composed of billions of intelligent particles—"

"Which can combine," continued Number 7 as he took his wife's hand, "and take on any shape we wish—"

His voice suddenly sounded not so much like a single voice but a whole crowd of people talking at once. And then the two of them suddenly flickered gray and began to merge, effectively doubling in size and taking on a massive cloudlike swarm. It was kind of like somebody had just kicked over the world's biggest hornet nest, and the hornets were on steroids and under the control of an evil supergenius. The cloud descended on a nearby pine tree and, with a stomach-turning buzzing noise, consumed every single branch and needle, leaving behind a burnt-looking stump.

At the top of the shrine's stairs, out of earshot but still within view of us, the attending monk let out a small yelp and fled into the park.

Number 7 and Number 8 morphed back into their usual separate forms as I tried to lift my jaw from the ground and not look quite as surprised as I was. The implications of their being colonial creatures were past alarming to consider. Shape-shifting, immunity to projectiles, immunity to blunt trauma, able to disperse and reassemble at any time—

“So, tell us, have you ever fought a cloud that can take any form it wants and has a collective intelligence higher than any army the universe has ever known?” asked Number 7.

“It has its challenges, we assure you,” said Number 8.

They didn’t need to tell me. What was I going to do? Drop a bomb on them in the middle of a Tokyo park?

“Yes, why don’t you be a smart little Alien Hunter and leave us alone?”

“He’s *not* going to leave you alone,” yelled Kildare. “And I’m going to help him!”

“But surely not right now—not in this crowded park, not where so many innocents might be hurt?”

I nodded at them coolly.

Just then Number 7’s cell phone began to ring, and he pulled it out of his pocket.

“Is it him?” asked Number 8.

“It is,” said Number 7 looking down at the readout of his smartphone.

“We’ll continue this later,” said Number 8 as Number 7 put the phone to his ear. And, just like that, the two of them turned and walked back down the path, out of the now quiet sanctuary and into the crowded, blossom-filled park.

Chapter 47

than it is in New York, Paris, or London, but one just happened to be there right then.

We quickly hopped into the backseat. “Omiya, please,” I said, identifying a major train station a good distance out of downtown where we could easily find a train.

“Anywhere you like, bosss,” hissed the driver.

“Oh, crap!” said Kildare with alarm. “It’s one of my parents’ Silurians!”

Silurians are a species of monkey-like reptile frequently hired as contract assassins, because they’re clever, patient, and obedient, and happen to enjoy killing so much that you don’t even need to pay them to do it.

The driver quickly locked the doors and hit a button that started blowing knockout gas through the vents. Fortunately, Kildare hadn’t quite closed his door and we leaped back out to the sidewalk as the cab accelerated away.

“Close one,” gasped Kildare.

“We could have taken him,” I said, “I *think*.”

“Well, something tells me my parents have a few more agents in reserve.”

“I think you’re right. And I also think, judging by how they had the JR station covered and now this cab, that they’re expecting us to try to get out of town.”

“So?”

“So, we’re doing exactly what they expect us to do, which must mean we’re making things easy on them.”

“So we should do the opposite of what they’re expecting, like—”

My mind raced as I spotted two more alien thugs making their way toward us down the crowded sidewalk.

“Let’s not go out of town; let’s go *down*town.”

“Downtown where?”

“Know anyplace to play video games?”

Chapter 48

this. I wouldn't go so far as to say they were ever kind to me, but at least they used to look after me. Lately, it's like I'm just another alien employee."

"What happened?"

"I don't know, but it doesn't matter now, does it? They're murderers. Mass murderers."

"But they're your parents," I said. "So you want to give them one last chance. I get it. Do you want to fill me in on your plan? Maybe I can help."

"You're helping already. You're giving me hope, Daniel." He got up from the bench. "Now let's go get some donuts, and then we can head over to the GC Tower."

"No need for the donuts," said a familiar voice behind us.

Number 7 was standing there holding an open box of Krispy Kremes.

Chapter 49

own parents are his worst enemies."

"Sounds hilarious," said Kildare, deadpan.

"It *is,*" said Number 7. "Although, if you start to feel overstimulated, we can try some off-line games too. Things like this __"

And, with that, steel shutters dropped across the store windows, and the two security guards pulled out their sidearms and began blasting away. At me.

Chapter 50

let us out of here."

"Won't hurt us, huh?" asked Number 7. "The great Alien Hunter is taking an early retirement?"

"Or," suggested Number 8, "perhaps the reason you're not going to harm us is that you've discovered you couldn't if you tried?"

"At any rate," said Number 7, "the relevant fact here is that *we* haven't made any such promises about not harming *you*."

And, with that, he shot out his arms and sprayed a stream of white liquid at me, which I'm glad I didn't assume to be nondairy creamer. I did a backward flip and landed ten yards away as the liquid hit the tile floor and melted through to the level below us.

Next time I had a chance, I guess I'd have to add that to their entry on the List computer: can shoot ultraconcentrated acid.

Now Number 8 had joined the action, easily mimicking my flip —despite the fact that she was wearing a woman's business suit and heels—and landing right next to me. I smiled sheepishly as she looked down at my surprised expression.

"My home world has stronger gravity than yours," she explained. And then her arms turned gray and became wicked-sharp-looking swords that she swung together toward my neck like a giant pair of scissors.

I ducked and sprang to Kildare's side in the middle of the showroom floor.

"You okay?" I asked. Number 7 was looking at Kildare intently, and for some weird reason his cheeks were puffed out and he was *blowing*.

"He's… making… pheromo—"

"Pheromones!" I blurted. Of course! That was the sharp odor I'd been smelling. And that must be why Kildare looked so sick. If the "cells" of his body and his parents' bodies worked the same way those of the ants in his terrarium did, Number 7 was disrupting the very function of Kildare's bodily systems.

"Here you go," I said, materializing a gas mask and quickly putting it over Kildare's face.

He nodded and put his hand on my shoulder as he breathed deeply through the mask. Already he was straightening back up, and color was returning to his skin. But we couldn't exactly savor the moment because Ellie Scissor-Arms was sprinting toward us, her razor arms whistling through the air as she came. And if that wasn't bad enough, Number 7 had produced a shoulder-firing microwave cannon from someplace and was in the process of drawing a bead on us. Before I could grab Kildare and drag him to safety, he pulled off his mask and did one of the most amazing things I've ever seen.

He pulled in his feet and hands and for a moment hovered there

off the floor in a curled-up ball. Then Kildare flickered gray and—BLAM!—exploded into a dim gray cloud that entirely filled the room.

A new sharp smell assaulted my nostrils and stung my eyes, then both his parents flickered gray and dispersed into indistinct gray clouds.

The demolished store was now filled with an angry buzzing sound, and Kildare rematerialized.

"It won't last too long," he said. "And I won't be able to surprise them that easily again," he said.

"Another pheromone?"

"Yeah, panic signal," he said. "I'd never tried it before, but I just set off an alarm that sends all their cells scrambling. Kind of like when you stir up a hornet's nest or an ant hill."

We bolted out into the lobby. The steel security shutters had now dropped around the perimeter of the building, and there was no obvious way out. I sized up one of the shutters and got ready to magnify my strength and peel it from its frame.

"So that panic signal you used on them is kind of a self-preservation thing?" I asked, stooping down to grab the shutter.

"Exactly," said a voice behind me. But it wasn't Kildare's.

Chapter 51

“Here’s the deal, Alien Hunter,” they announced vaingloriously. “You have thirty seconds, and it’s your choice how you spend them. If it’s any comfort, we can assure you that you’ll soon get to see Kildare —or, at least, *parts* of him.”

Rage boiled up inside me, but I couldn’t just blindly attack them. I didn’t want to hurt my friend. I had to play along. “What do you mean by that?”

“You can either stay here and chat with us, as you’re doing now,” they continued, “or you can have a head start.”

“A head start? What are we playing, tag?”

“You can call it whatever you like, but we tend to refer to it as ‘hunting.’ And then once we’ve caught you, we’ll devour you, just as we did Kildare. Only in your case, it will be a lot more painful and *permanent*.”

“Oh, look at that,” taunted the black-eyed cloud, morphing part of itself into a wrist with a watch wrapped around it, at which it glanced dramatically. “Time’s up!”

My ears filled with an awful buzzing sound as the cloud began to envelop me.

BOOK THREE

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

Chapter 52

could I simultaneously *not* kill the Kildare parts of the cloud?

- Going back in time and hoping things would work out differently. But I'd been told that Number 1 had somehow put a block on time travel for me, and since I had no idea how he'd done it, I couldn't possibly figure out how to work around it.
- Summoning a billion carnivorous dragonflies and instructing them to eat only those bits that looked like Number 7 and Number 8's cells. I had no idea, though, if there actually were a way to tell Kildare's bits apart from his parents' bits… or if a billion dragonflies would fit inside the lobby… or if dragonflies were even trainable.

In short, maybe if I'd had a month and access to the intergalactic equivalent of Wikipedia, I could have come up with something. But I didn't have a month. And I didn't have a computer. And I *did* have a big black cloud of malevolent alien cells trying to sting me to death.

Again and again, they came after me. At first I was dodging pretty well—biding some time, hoping against hope I'd find a weakness, a chink in their amorphous armor—but with every leap, spin, duck, and parry, I grew a little less confident, and a little slower, and a little more scared.

And then blackness exploded across my vision, and searing white light seemed to be pouring into my skull.

They'd hit me. They'd gotten me in the face.

How could I have been so stupid? How could I have let them do this to me? How could I have thought—after losing Kildare, after my friends' and father's warnings—that I'd ever stand a chance against them?

I leaped blindly, as high and as fast as I could, wanting only to get away, wanting only to make the pain stop.

I smashed into the wall on the far side of the room with a bone-jarring thud, but I was almost grateful for it. The stinging wasn't as bad as before, and my vision had partially come back. Apparently, they'd only grazed me.

And then, finally—as if the impact had knocked some sense into me—I had a halfway decent idea.

Chapter 53

wouldn't shatter.

I grabbed it in my fist, and it made a disgusting popping sound as I crushed the life out of it.

"Ouch," pouted the cloud's voices as it turned its four baleful black eyes toward me.

"You started it," I reminded them, as a wall of darkness roared near. I almost got out of the way, but it hit me in the leg—hard.

And then I began to fall, and my entire being exploded in pain, and, well, I don't remember much after that…

Chapter 54

“Well, that’s because we’re inside the statue’s head. There aren’t a lot of light sources in here.”

“So… why are we inside a Buddha statue’s head?”

“Because that’s where you teleported yourself, genius.”

“I teleported myself? Away from Number 7 and Number 8?”

“That’s what I was just telling you. Don’t you remember anything?”

“Would I be asking—” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I had to stop talking. My brain was wobbling like bowl of jelly on a dirt bike’s fender. Dana forced a Japanese lemon soda to my lips. It was really sour, but it felt good in my sore, dry mouth. I drained the entire bottle in less than five seconds, a new personal best.

“That’s it. Drink up. Clearly, you aren’t ready to heal yourself yet,” said Dana, taking the soda and resting my head gently in her lap. “So, get some sleep. Let your body do some of the work on its own. I’ll be right here.”

It’s true—between the pain and the exhaustion, there was no way I could possibly think about doing something as complicated as diagnosing and fixing my wounds. You know why doctors have to go to school for like ten years before they get licensed? It’s because healing is a complicated business. Way too complicated for somebody as beaten down as I was then. But I wasn’t going to stress about it. After all, Dana was right there next to me. Seemed like nothing bad ever happened when Dana was around. I turned my head and started to thank her, but she pressed her finger to my lips.

“Shhh. You should sleep, Daniel.”

I did want to sleep. But I also wanted to figure things out. I wanted to figure out if Number 7 and Number 8 had done any permanent damage to my body or mind. I wanted to figure out what Dana might be thinking right now. I wanted to figure out what that weird high-pitched droning sound was.

“Is that my stomach, Dana?”

“I wish,” she said, jumping to her feet and letting my poor aching head slam down on the steel platform where we’d been resting.

“Ow!” I complained. “I’m injured here.”

“You’ll think you were just tickled by a feather if we don’t get out of here right now. That noise is coming from an alien skycar. *The hunters are coming!*”

Chapter 55

the approaching alien vehicle that was now a mere one hundred… fifty… twenty-five… ten yards away.

Chapter 56

morphing out.

My leg was literally sprouting rainbow-colored fur and flexing and stretching and shrinking and then becoming invisible. And before I had a chance to freak out about *that,* it started rematerializing (without the rainbow fur) and stretching and shrinking and then popping back into its usual shape.

At the same time, a feeling of cool relief washed over me. The leg was no longer giving me any pain. It actually felt darn good.

"Daniel, what the heck was that?"

For a moment I was unsure myself. I hadn't *consciously* healed myself. Then a bubbly giggle echoed in my head.

"I think I must have picked up a little something from the Pleionid," I said to Dana.

"It taught you how to heal yourself? Why didn't you do it earlier?"

"Because I didn't do it. It kind of did it by itself."

"Weird. But your leg's better?"

"Right as rain," I said.

"Prove it," she said.

"Sure!" I grinned, nodding at the Tower. "Wanna race?"

The leg was better. I even set a new personal best. Four hundred thirty-eight miles per hour! My sneakers were a little worse for wear, but that's okay. Unlike colonial alien supervillains, I *understand* sneakers. So I made myself a fresh pair.

Chapter 57

“I found it! The dataport!” I said, attaching my tracking unit and ignoring her.

“Um, Daniel—”

“What?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, but I heard weird cracking noises, then looked up from the display. Dana was silently backing up toward me.

Beyond her, the sticky black things were no longer sticky black things. They’d disgorged a half dozen metal-skinned creatures that were busy unfurling wings, fangs, claws, stingers, and a host of other appendages that you might expect if you were to cross a twenty-five-pound hornet with a sack of scissors.

“Oh,” I said.

Chapter 58

appreciate it.

I looked down the mast to gauge how much time we had until our attackers reached us, but just then the light at the top of the tower blinked on. My vision became a sea of eye-clenching red, and my ears filled with the thrum of the discharging capacitors that powered the light.

"Bright enough for ya?" asked Dana, rubbing her eyes as the lights went back out.

"They're to warn low-flying aircraft," I explained. "They have to be bright. Which also means they have to use a lot of electricity."

As the capacitors recharged, I examined the electrical conduits running into the lights and did some quick calculations.

"Okay," I announced. "On the count of three, we jump up again."

Dana pointed at the sky above us. "Don't know if you noticed, but… there are no more platforms to jump to."

"Just do it, 'kay? Straight up and as high as you can go."

She shrugged as I tried to tune out the ringing metallic sounds of our pursuers, concentrating instead on the increasingly higher pitch of the charging capacitors.

"One, two, three," I counted. *"Jump!"*

As soon as I'd delivered a swift kick to the conduit, Dana and I leaped up into the air. The high-tension wires spilled free and exposed the copper leads to the tower's structural steel.

I was only a couple feet in the air when the coordinated pulse emerged from the capacitors. It tore a new path swiftly through the tower's girders, then up the legs and through the bodies of the giant alien insects.

"Nice!" yelled Dana as we landed back on the platform and eyed the sizzling corpses of the guard bugs. Then I quickly repaired the wiring so we wouldn't get shocked ourselves and so that low-flying aircraft wouldn't have any trouble seeing the tower.

We scrambled back down to Number 7 and Number 8's transmitter. "All set?" asked Dana, as I unplugged my handset from the device.

"All set. I just entered some new coordinates."

"New coordinates?"

"The transmitter—and the hunters—will now think I reside on a rocky island just south of the Comoros Islands off the coast of Africa."

"But won't that be dangerous for the people who live there?"

"It's uninhabited," I reassured her. "With any luck, the aliens will get frustrated and start hunting each other. Now, let's get moving."

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

- And how I had *no idea* why all the surfers had just left the water and were now racing up the beach, screaming their heads off in sheer terror.

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

formulas. I'd begun by visualizing a series of molecules, then I measured the proper proportions, oriented a series of catalysts, and, finally, isolated the very precise conditions required to initiate the reaction.

And now it was time to stop visualizing and begin *creating.* I materialized a handful of the two principal reactants in Kildare's formula—one came out as a yellow powder, the other a greenish liquid—and quickly cast them down into the wave that just then was breaking at my feet.

What happened next wasn't magic; it was pure, hard-core science. But the results were so dramatic that I imagine the world's greatest magicians would have paid to see it themselves.

A scream like a billion wailing mice went up, and the two-headed Godzilla in front of me began to sway back and forth. Its screams became louder as it lunged for me, but instead of a giant hand swiping at me, there was nothing there.

Because the creature's body was melting away. Dissolving into tiny black globs of decomposing alien, which were now beginning to rain down on the beach.

"Get him! GET HIM!" the voices screeched, but its body was breaking down too quickly. "We are indestructible! This is IMPOSSIBLE!"

I jumped back as the now limbless torso began pitching forward and landed in a heap at my feet. I held my ground and watched as the entire beach became covered in a black slick of alien protoplasm.

You see, salt water plus 1.9 pounds of the compound created by Kildare's formulas result in a self-sustaining reaction that produces a gas which basically interrupts the communications between all the "cells" in the bodies of Number 7 and Number 8's species.

In other words, I'd created a kind of nerve gas that destroyed the bonds between the tiny pieces of Number 7 and Number 8. They literally fell apart in front of my eyes.

"That's for Kildare, you scum," I shouted.

But I felt no joy from having destroyed my nemeses. Instead, as I wiped the oily stuff from my eyes and ran out into the polluted water, all I felt was loss and horror at what I'd done. I dove again and again into the waves—flailing around, searching frantically.

This was not part of the plan. After all, it was *his* formula I'd followed. Kildare was supposed to be here.

Kildare was supposed to live.

Chapter 63

He shook his head. “It had to be done. Just like now you have to take out Number 1.”

“I’ve been thinking, Kildare. With your smarts and your abilities, what would you say about *joining* me? With your help, we could finish off the rest of the aliens on the List. I’ll introduce you to Dana, Willy, Joe, Emma, my parents, Pork Chop…. You could be part of our group. My family.”

He was smiling sadly and shaking his head. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t? You need to finish school or something?” I laughed.

“I resisted the reaction, but I… I can’t go on.”

“What? You’re here. You’re *alive*. Your parents aren’t coming back.”

“I’m too young to go on by myself, Daniel. My parents were still feeding me. It’s how we develop. Until we achieve full maturity, we can’t subsist on our own. We need mature colonies to sustain us.”

“But there must be others besides your parents—”

“The irony is that even though my parents hunted other species to extinction, we were the last three of our kind.”

“But on your home planet, surely—”

“My parents consumed them all. We were the last.”

“But you came up with that formula. There must be something we can do with your chemistry and my powers that would work…”

He shook his head. “Keep up the good work, Daniel. And please say good-bye to Professor Kuniyoshi for me. He was a good teacher.”

“Kildare, this can’t be happening—”

But it was too late. He was already starting to flicker in and out. “Kildare! You’re the only true friend I have—the only one who knows what it’s like to be alone. Tell me what to do!”

“You know what to do, Daniel,” he said, starting to slump. “Finish what you started. Save this planet. You’re the Alien Hunter. And remember—you were my only true friend too.”

Then he collapsed into a black slick at my feet.

I don’t know how long I cried—my heart was breaking. I hadn’t lost someone I cared about in ages, and all the grief came flooding back fast and furious.

But Kildare was right. I was the Alien Hunter. I had a job to do. A big one. I had to pull myself together.

After a few deep breaths, I grabbed a handful of the blackened sand, stuck it into my pocket, and ran up to the dunes above the beach.

EPILOGUE

Chapter 64

pain of a loss like that, but you *will* keep getting stronger. And you *will* keep saving lives—good lives of good people, like Kildare. You know that, don't you?"

I shrugged.

"Remember, we're still just teenagers. We have most of our lives ahead of us. And that's a lot."

The door slid open behind me, and Dana let go of my hand.

"Come on inside, you two," said Mom. "The Murkamis are leaving, and we need to say good-bye."

Chapter 65

“No question, you’ve suffered a lot, Daniel. And now to have lost Kildare…”

“Yeah!” I blurted, stung even by the mention of my dead friend’s name. “I’m getting much more experience losing than I am hunting. Maybe they should call me the Alien Loser instead, huh?”

Dad shook his head. “Let me ask just one thing of you, Daniel.”

“Sure,” I said. I knew I was being a jerk. I softened my voice and looked him in the eye for the first time. “Name it, Dad.”

“You know what it’s like to lose a best friend. Promise me you’ll at least try to understand what it would be like to lose… a son.”

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JAMES PATTERSON was selected by kids across America as the Children's Choice Book Awards Author of the Year in 2010. He is the internationally bestselling author of the highly praised Maximum Ride novels, the Witch & Wizard series, the Daniel X series, *Med Head,* and the detective series featuring Alex Cross. His books have sold more than 230 million copies worldwide, making him one of the bestselling authors of all time. He lives in Florida.

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The Final Warning
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Illustrated Novels

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Daniel X: The Manga, Vol. 1 (with SeungHui Kye)
Maximum Ride: The Manga, Vol. 1 (with NaRae Lee)
Maximum Ride: The Manga, Vol. 2 (with NaRae Lee)
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For previews of upcoming books in these series and other information, visit www.WitchAndWizard.com, www.MaximumRide.com, and www.Daniel-X.com.

For more information about the author, visit www.JamesPatterson.com.

* This dialogue was translated from Kornish, a dialect most often used by certain clans of deep-space Outer Ones.

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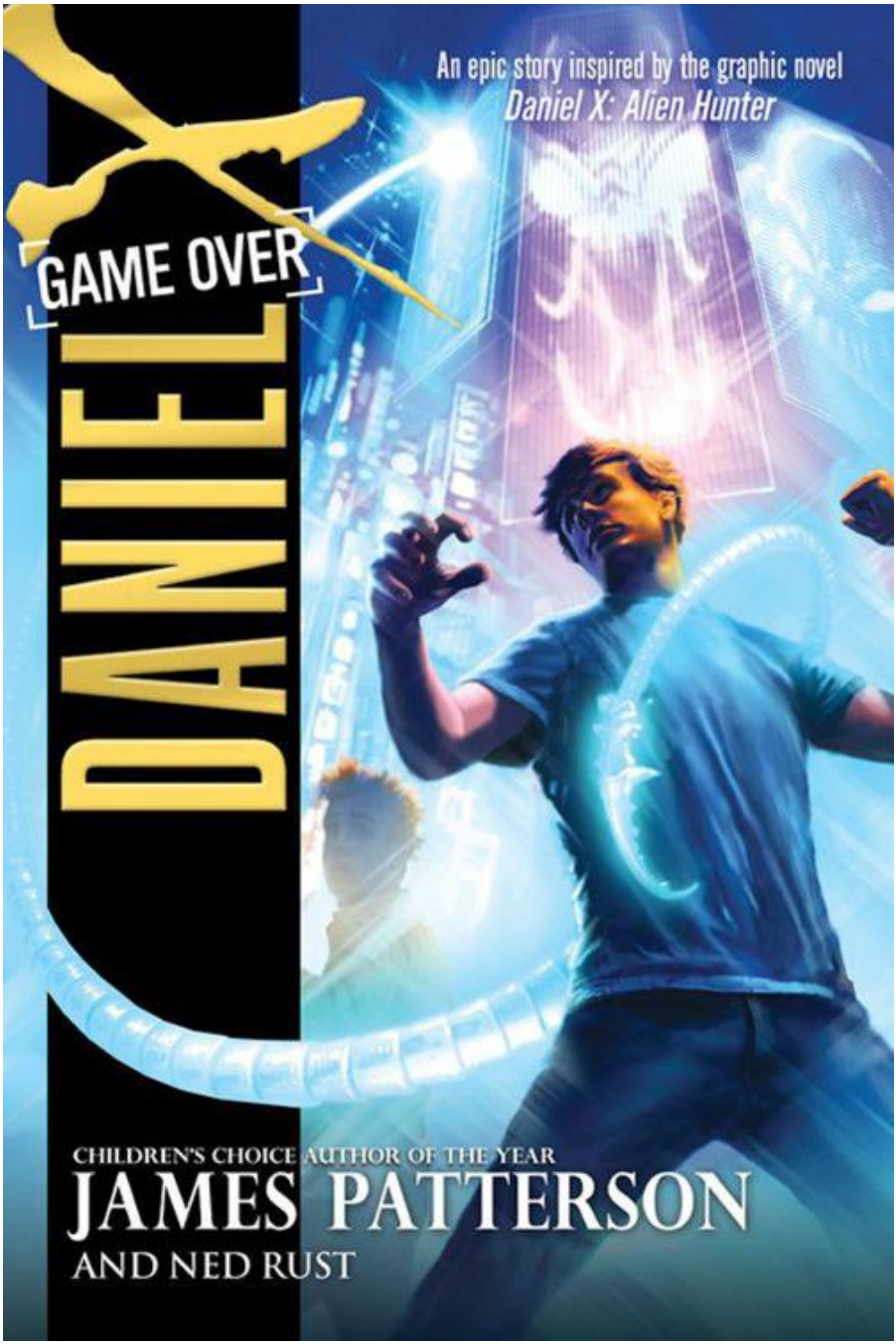
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